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ABSTRACT

The Setswana language possesses a verbal prefix that, according to some grammarians of the language such as D. T. Cole, is categorized as the reflexive prefix, closely allied to objectival concords. If the morphology suggests that this morpheme be characterized as a reflexive object prefix, it does not always give expected results in its semantic and syntactic role. The notion of reflexive object signifies that the referent of the subject term of the transitive verbal form cumulates the two roles normally devolving to two distinct participants respectively represented by the subject and the object. (MDM)

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THE SETSWANA i(n) VERBAL PREFIX

by
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Abstract:

The Setswana language possesses a verbal prefix which, according to some grammarians (Cole, among others) of the language, is categorized as the reflexive prefix (closely allied to objectival concords). If the morphology suggests that this morpheme be characterized as a reflexive object prefix, it does not always give expected results in its semantic and syntactic role.

In the dictionaries and the grammars of Setswana there exist verbs which are cited with the prefix i-. According to the analysis that Cole makes, the "i" is supposed to be followed by a nasal, i(n)-, which is not manifested, but that leaves some effects which attest nasalization:

go ipolaya /xɷ-ipɷlaj-a/ (to kill oneself)	< /i-pɷlaj-a/ < I in bólaj-a I
go ipona /xɷ-ipon-a/ (to see one self)	< /i-pon-a/ < I in bóna I
go ipha /xɷ-iph-a/(to give oneself)	< /i-ph-a/ < I in fá I
go ikemisa /xɷ-ikemis-a/(to get oneself up)	< /i-kemis-a/< I in émisa
go ithuta /xɷ-ithut-a/ (to teach oneself)	< /i-thut-a/ < I in ruta I
go ikwala /xɷ-ikwal-a/ (to write oneself)	< /i-kwal-a/ < I in kwála I
go itapisa /xɷ-itapis-a/ (to tire oneself)	< /i-tapis-a/< I in tapisa

The behavior of these consonants justifies the attribution to this prefix a structural form iNI which undergoes successively the following rules:

1) in contact with n, the consonants are modified according to the phonological rule[1] ;

[1] consonantanl changes in the context of the morpheme n-
b - p
l/d - t

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2) n, when it belongs to the morpheme | ɨN|, is in all cases effaced.

The notation ɨ(n)-, therefore signifies that the morpheme imposes to the consonant which follows it the mutation generally imputable to the presence of a nasal, and that no nasal ever appears in the realization.

The fact that these verbs are written as a single unit with this prefix and that this prefix provokes phonological modifications is not in itself exceptional, for, other indexes can also do that, in particular the marker (concord or pronoun) of the first person singular:

Conjugated forms:	Infinitive:
n bone | n bón-ɛ | > /mpón-ɛ/ (see me!)	go mpona /xɷ-mpón-a/
n bitse | n bíts-e | > /mpíts-e/ (call me!)	go mpitsa /xɷ-mpíts-a/
mo bone | mɷ́ bón-ɛ | > /ḿmon-e/ (see him!)	go mmona /xɷ-ḿmɔn-a/
mo bitse| mɷ́ bíts-e | > /ḿmíts-e/ (call him!)	go mmitsa /xɷ-ḿmíts-a/
n emise | n emis-e | > /ŋkémis-e/ (stop me)	go nkemisa /xɷ-ŋkémis-a/
m fe | m f-é | > /mh-é/ (give him!)	go mha /xɷ-mh-á/
	go mo fa /xɷ-mɷ-f-á/

But these forms are not cited in the dictionaries with their prefixes, for, n is without any possible doubt an object marker, whilst the status of ɨ(n)- needs to be discused.

The convention of the orthography which presents this morpheme attached to the verbal base and gives the impression that it is lexicalized, suggests a special status[2] letting it be supposed that it can also be considered as a verbal derivative affix, as any other regular verbal derivation by suffixation. But morphologically this prefix is outside the verbal base.

ʤ - c
Ø - k
f - ph
r - th
s - tsh
ʃ - ch
h/x - kh/ kxh

[2] the marker for the first person singular n is also written attached to the base, the difference is syntactic.

At the tonal level this morpheme has an autonomous behavior similar to that of the object markers:

o iphile dijo./ó-ɨ-phîle dɪjɔ́/(he served himself food.)
o mo file dijo./ó-mɔ-fîle dɪjɔ́/ (he served him food.)

iphe dijo! /ɨ-ph-ɛ dɪjɔ́/ (serve yourself food!)
mo fe dijo!/ (mhe dijo!) /mɔ́-fɛ dɪjɔ́/ /ḿ-hɛ dɪjɔ́/ (serve him food!)

In the constitution of verbal forms, the ɨ(n)- occupies the same place as the object marker and presents the same morphological properties. It can be separated from the verbal base by the object marker (OM) (or object concord, according to Cole) of the first person singular, which confirms its morphological affinities with the object markers:

ɨ-ka -a (to trust) > ɨ-ŋ-ká -a (to trust me)
ɨ-pɔlaɟ-a (to kill oneself) > ɨ-m-pólaɛɨ-a (to kill oneself for me)
ɨ-tumɛdis-a (to please) > ɨ-n-túmɛdis-a (to please me)
ɨ-tshwarɛl-a (pardon) > ɨ-n-tshwárɛl-a (to pardon me)

Otherwise in most cases, without the object index of the first person singular, the ɨ(n)- prefix follows any other object marker:

ke tlaa reka kgomo ya maŧi. (I shall buy a milk cow.)
/kɪ-tɬaa-rɛk-a kxhomɔ́ já maʃi/

→ ke tlaa ithekela kgomo ya maŧi. (I shall buy myself a milk cow.)
/kɪ-tɬaa-ɨ-thɛkɛl-a kxhomɔ́ já maʃi /

→ ke tlaa e ithekela. (I shall buy it for myself)
/kɪ-tɬaa-ɨ-ɨ-thɛ́kɛl-a/

In the examples given earlier it is easier to recognize that ɨ(n) followed by a verb indicates what the grammars call a pronominal or reflexive verbal form. The notion of "reflexive" which is often used to designate this form of the Setswana verb poses a particular problem, for, these forms cover a semantic range that is quite broad. One finds the verbal forms of the following types:

itapolosa /i-tapɔlɔs-a/ (to rest (oneself)) < lapolosa /lapɔlɔs-a/ (rest)
ipona /i-pɔn-a/ (to see oneself) < bona /bɔ́n-a/ (to see)
ipolaya /i-pɔlaj-a/ (to kill oneself, to inflict oneself)
< bolaya /bɔ́laj-a/ (to kill)
ipha /i-ph-a (to give oneself something...) < fa /f-á/ (to give)
ithata /i-that-a/ (to love oneself) < rata /rát-a/ (to love)
ikwadisa/i-kwádis-a/(to have oneself registered)
< kwadisa/kwádis-a/(to register)
itapisa /i-tápis-a/ (to tire oneself) < lapisa /lapis-a/ (to tire)
etc.,

As it can be observed these verbs do not entail the same linguistic "action" by the nominal in the position of the subject. From the point of view of its position in the verbal word, the i(n)- arises unquestionably from the same paradigm as the objective markers. Its presence reduces to two instead of three the maximum number of object indexes that can be carried by the verbal form. It therefore is only for a part of these forms that the traditional definition of the reflexive is valid. The other part is not covered by this value:

<u>"Reflexive" verbs in the strict sense of the term</u>:

ikaba /i-kaba/: to block one's ears
ikama /i-kama/: to comb oneself
ikapesa /i-kapɛsa// to dress up oneself
ikoba /i-kɔba/: to bow oneself
ingwaya /i-ŋwaja/: to scratch oneself
ipolaya /i-pɔlaja/: to kill oneself
iteba /i-tɛba/: to look at self
ithonkga /i-thɔnkxa/: to hurt one's sow
itlhakola /i-tɬhakɔla/: to wipe one's bottoms
itshasa /i-tshasa/: to smear oneself; to use make-ups on oneself

This list was picked from the 240 verbs derived by the prefixation of i(n)- presented in the Setswana dictionary written by Kgasa. It is always possible to prefix any transitive verb in order to express the reflexive value. Therefore this list can be considered to be non-exhaustuve:

ipofa /i-pɔfa/: to tie oneself
ikwala /i-kwal-a/: to write down one's name; to write on one's body -(to tatoo oneself)
ikgabisa /i-kxabisa/: to put ornaments on oneself
ikgaola /i-kxaola/: to cut oneself
ithema /i-thema/: to "axe" oneself (= to injure oneself with an axe)
etc.

The question that can be asked at this point is whether one must include or not in the "I" entry of the dictionary these types of verbs, for, it is difficult to determine which ones among them are more lexicalized than others. There are verbal forms in which the reflexive value is productive. But it is also clear that in what concerns certain verbal forms with the i(n)- prefix, the notion of "reflexive" is not appropriate to designate them: they express another value than that, a value that is more abstract. This non-reflexive value of i(n)- is found in the following verbal forms:

1. With certain verbs the i(n)- prefix presents a special meaning which does not seem to have an evident link with the non-derived form:

ikana /i-kan-a/ (to swear, to take an oath) <ana /an-a/(to venerate,honor)
ikanya /i-ka -a/ (to trust (in) somebody) < ikana/i-kan-a/ (to take an oath)
ikaelela /i-kaelel-a/ (to be determined) <kaelela /kaelel-a/ (to indicate for/to)
ikutlwa/i-kutlw-a/(to feel well) < utlwa/útlw-a/(to feel, to hear)
ithoma/i-thom-a/ (to relieve oneself) < roma /rɔ́m-a/ (to send)
itisa /i-tís-a/ (to spend an idle time, make fun before going to sleep)
< disa /dís-a/ (to keep, to herd)
itumela /i-tumel-a/ (to rejoice, to be happy)
< dumela /dumel-a/ (to believe, to be in agreement)
itshwarela/i-tshwárel-a/(to pardon) <tshwarela/tshwárel-a/(to hold for)

This value expresses a "state", rather than an "action" on itself, of the agent in the position of the subject. In fact in earlier but rare forms of written Setswana, and in some dialects of the language, some of the verbal forms in this category can appear with a double prefix. The reason might be that the first prefix is no longer felt to be co-referent with the nominal in the position of the subject:

go iikanya Jeso. /xɑ-i-i-ka -a ɟéso/ (to trust in Jesus.)*
go iitumedisa Morena. /xɑ-i-i-tumedis-a mɔrena/ (to please the Lord.)

2. When it is used with the applicative forms of intransitive verbs, the i(n)- prefix often gives the idea of "doing or acting without a precise aim, or with insouciance". This value has no precise correspondence in English, but it can be transposed by a paraphrase:

ipuela /i-púɛl-a/ (to speak unconcernedly)	! bú-a (to speak)
itidimalela/i-tidimalɛl-a/(to just keep quiet)	! dídimal-a(to keep quiet)
itulela /i-tulɛl-a/ (to sit and do nothing)	! dúl-a (to sit down)
ithobalela /i-thɔbalɛl-a/ (to just sleep)	! rɔbal-a (to sleep)
itshamekela/i-tshamɛkɛl-a/ (to just play)	! tshámɛk-a(to play)

3. It is possible, with applicative verbal derivatives, to add one or two objects or object indexes to a base prefixed with i(n)-. This mechanism functions in Setswana if there is a relation of possession between the subject and the action that the verbal form expresses. The action is effectuated by the subject for its own benefit, or for its own interest. One could expound this value by translating "to do something for one's own benefit/interest".

go ikwalela batsadi lokwalo. * (to write oneself the letter to parents.)
/xɑ-i-kwalɛl-a batsádi lɔkwálɔ/ (to write a letter to one's parents.)

go ipolelela Modimo dibe. *(to confess oneself sins to God.)
/xɑ-i-pɔlɛlɛl-a mɔdimɔ dibé/ (confess one's sins to God.)

go iponela kgotla molato. *(to admit oneself guilt to the court.)
/xɑ-i-pɔnɛl-a kxhɔtʰla mɔlató/ (to admit one's guilt to the court.) or

go ithutela tiro sefora. *(to teach oneself French for a job.)
/xɑ-i-thutɛl-a tirɔ sɛfɔrá/ (to learn French for (one's) a job.)

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* literal translation.

Either with a pronominalisation:

go ba ikwalela lokwalo. *(to write oneself to them a letter.)
/xɷ-bá-i-kwálɛl-a lɔkwálɔ/

go O ipolelela dibe. *(to confess sins to him oneself.)
/xɷ-ɔ́-i-pólɛl-a dibí/

go e ithutela sefora. *(to teach oneself French for it.)
/xɷ i-i-thútɛl-a sɛfɔrá/

Either again with all the nouns pronominalized:

go lo ba ikwalela./xɷ-lɔ́-ba-i-kwalɛl-a/ *(to write it to them oneself.)
go di O ipolelela. /xɷ-dí-ɔ-i-pɔlɛl-a/ *(to confess them to him oneself.)
go se e ithutela. /xɷ-sí-ɛ-i-thutɛl-a/ *(to learn it for it oneself.)

Here, once again the transposition and the translation of the Setswana phrase structure is quite a problem. The pronominalisation of all the nouns is not "grammatical" in English.

With these verbal forms, the rôle of the prefix i(n)- indicates that the agent gets into or is in a state or relation of intrinsic possession with either one of the nominals in the position of the object. The reflexive value is therefore totally excluded.

4. When the prefix i(n)- is followed by a causative base, it often implies that the verbal action must be initiated or provoked by the subject, but its accomplishment depends on the agent which is not the subject and which is not necessarily explicit. The verbal form so derived then takes the value of "to let oneself undergo", and, or "to make onself undergo".

ikise kwa sepatelelng. (let yourself/ make yourself be taken to hospital.)
/i-kis-ɛ kwá sɛpátɛlɛŋ/

ikalafise. /i-kalafis-ɛ/ (make/let yourself be treated.)

bana ba a ikwadisa. /baná bá-a-i-kwadis-a/ (the children let themselves registered)

As it can be observed the agent of the i(n)- form is in a "half active" or "half passive" state. This value can be compared to another verbal form which is passive, and which can, in certain contexts, be translated the same way:

isiwa kwa sepateleng. /is-iw-a kwá sepateleŋ/
(let yourself be taken to hospital.)

alaswa/alafiwa! /alás-w-a//alaf-iw-a/ (let yourself be treated.)

bana ba a kwalwa. /baná bá-a-kwál-wa/ (the children let themselves registered..)

5. In certain cases the agent of the i(n) verbal form followed by the causative suffix can be made explicit by being introduced by a preposition **ká** "by". For some verbal forms the presence of this preposition is optional. Like in the simple causative, this form with **ká** enables one to dispel any possible confusion in interpretation due to the double transitivity of the Setswana causative. The presence of the preposition makes a precision about the relationship between the agent and the object. The subject of the sentence, which undergoes the "verbal action" is interpreted as being instrumental, but it is not the one which accomplishes the act expressed by the verbal form:

peba e ijesa ka katse. (the mouse lets the cat eat it.)
/peba i-i-jes-a ká katse/ *(the mouse makes itself eaten by the cat.)

bana ba inisa (ka) pula. (the children let rain fall on them.)
/baná bá-i-n-is-a (ká) púla/
*(the children make themselves rained upon by rain.)

monna yo o ijesa (ka) basadi. (this man lets women ruin him.)
/moŋna jó ó-i-jes-a (ká) basádi/
*(this man makes himself ruined by women.)

In conclusion we say that since the term "reflexive" which is currently used to qualify verbal forms with this prefix is restrictive in accounting for the totality of the uses of this morpheme. An alternative classification needs to be put forward as follows:

a) The "essentially reflexive" forms: The value of these forms is the most active of the i(n)- pefixed verbal forms;

b) The "essentially pronominal" forms or middle voice forms: This value concerns all other non-reflexive forms.

The problem posed, therefore, by the choice of the general term "marker of the reflexive object" is of the semantic and syntactic order. In fact, the notion of reflexive object signifies that the referent of the subject term of the transitive verbal form cumulates the two roles normally devolving to two distinct participants respectively represented by the subject and the object. This is effectively valid, as we have mentioned earlier, for a part of the uses of i(n)- prefix.

With the "essentially pronominal" forms, the i(n)- prefix does not indicate the identity between the referent of the subject and the referent of the object, but rather the nature of the participation of the subject in the action which can only be accounted for by the classical term of the "middle voice". According to Creissels[3] , it is probable that this morpheme, in the earlier state of the language, had a reflexive pronoun function, but synchronically, it seems difficult to analyze it otherwise than as the morpheme of the middle voice whose anteposition to the verb is not compatible with the presence of the nominal constituent in the object position.

In fact, with the i(n)- prefix in the non-reflexive values, one faces a very particular anaphoric function which has somehow gotten frozen in the sentence frame work. The morpheme i(n)- is no longer a pronoun, but a verbal prefix. The i(n)- is not a grammatical form, but a value, the reflexive and the middle voice being the main ones. One would have a lot to gain in clarity from that perspective when describing i(n)- prefixed verbal forms of the Setswana language.

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[3] D. Creissels (1991): Description des langues négro-africaines et théorie syntaxique, ELLUG, France

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